

LBI participates in the Delta Regional Authority Broadband Summit (October 23, 2012)

In its attempts to fulfill its mission of promoting the adoption and usage of broadband technology among Louisiana's rural population, the Louisiana Broadband Initiative faces a challenging task. LBI staff has invited community leaders and citizens to regional broadband summits in the past, developing interesting agendas with dynamic speakers – speakers touching on the benefits of broadband utilization, in education, economic development, job skill development, entertainment, convenience, telemedicine and more – only to be disappointed by low attendance.

It was with this in mind that LBI Director David Moore sought out alternative approaches to reaching this target audience. Moore had previously become aware of the Delta Regional Authority and its mission to enhance economic development and improve the quality of life among its 8-state, 252-county/parish region through transportation and infrastructure improvement, job creation and job retention and believed if he could persuade the DRA to promote broadband among its vast network, then not only would the targeted rural audience in Louisiana be reached, but similar audiences among the other states in the DRA region – Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama – would also benefit.

Lacking contacts directly with DRA staff, Moore and his colleague LBI Analyst Brad Smith contacted Marie Bruno of Connect Arkansas, who acts in that state in the same capacity as does LBI in Louisiana. Bruno has developed and maintained contacts with DRA staff over many years and agreed that it would be a major win for the region should the DRA agree to host a broadband summit. She effectively tapped into her resources and in mid-September was informed that the DRA would host a multi-state summit in Memphis on October 23, 2012. The DRA agreed to line up keynote speakers and looked to the states to fill in the remainder of the one-day agenda. With this news, Bruno and Moore began contacting representatives in the remaining six states to secure their involvement in the planning process and participation at the event.

Fast forward a few weeks – a very brief time in event planning – and over 80 attendees converged on Memphis for the Delta Regional Authority's first broadband summit. Headlining the agenda were DRA National Co-Chair Chris Massingill, Connect-2-Compete CEO Zach Leverenz, NTIA's Broadband Technologies Opportunities Program (BTOP) Director Tony Wilhelm, as well as presentations by the State Broadband Offices in each of the eight member states, including LBI's Brad Smith. It was a successful event, best summarized by Chairman Massingill's following statement:

I believe that our individual communities can only be strong if the region is strong. It is our priority to raise our people out of poverty, provide them with a first-class education, and help create sustainable, good-paying jobs for years to come. These goals can be achieved when broadband becomes a standard part of the economic development conversation.

The best may be yet-to-come: the DRA has indicated that it views the Memphis summit as only its initial move towards its continued efforts to promote broadband adoption and usage in its region – more summits may follow in 2013. Stay tuned to the LBI website (www.broadband.louisiana.gov) for more details as they become available.